Public History and the study of Law: reviewing *The Limehouse Golem* (2017). Directed by Juan Carlos Medina [film]. 109 min. UK. Production: Lipsync Post, Number 9 Films.

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Abstract

This is an interdisciplinary discussion, looking at the use of popular history for the critical understanding of the reconstruction of crime and patriarchal hierarchy. By way of reviewing the recent movie *The Limehouse Golem*, it illustrates the significance of theoretically engaging with a period crime fiction movie. It is argued that this assessment is less relevant in terms of producing historical understanding; rather, what may be a fiction, reveals instead our own contemporary cultural fixations.

Key words: popular history; postmodernism; representation of crime; period crime fiction; patriarchal hierarchy; women criminals.

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Oh! Mr Porter, what shall I do? And she'd never had her ticket punched before…

Reciting this rhyme and dressed as a young male sailor, the character of Little Lizi Darling of the Music Hall in the recent movie *The Limehouse Golem* reflects far more than mere subversive entertainment.

This short paper discusses the relatively new type of history of 'public history',[1] and its value to legal and criminology studies. In effect, we are surrounded by public history in the forms of TV historical documentaries, artwork historical-exhibitions,[2] museums,[3] TV historical dramas and movies, historical blogs,[4] and many other collections of memories and items arranged and composed not only by academic historians but also in collaboration with and by the public. Legal scholars have long contested the historical validity of Whig histories; however, public historians go beyond that- they contest the monopoly that the academia has

[1] The idea of public history developed during the 1990s particularly in Australia, North America and the US; the practice was later introduced in the UK and Europe with the postmodern approach to history (Sayer,2015, 187).

[2] The online project 'Exploring the history of prisoner health', lead by Catherine Cox and Hilary Marland is also engaged with art exhibitions and theatre production (https://histprisonhealth.com/arts-projects/ accessed 13 March 2018).

[3] The National Justice Museum in Nottingham is currently hosting the Women in Prison Exhibition- 'examining the treatment and experiences of female prisoners from the nineteenth-century to the present day' (http://www.nationaljusticemuseum.org.uk/event/women-prison-exhibition/ accessed 13 March 2018).

[4] Wayward Woman is a blog which examines the lives of Victorian England's female offenders and it reflects the research carried out by Lucy Williams (https://waywardwomen.wordpress.com/about/ accessed 13 March 2018).

on the creation of knowledge and its value (Sayer, 2015). Unlike legal historians, criminologists have been somewhat aware of this concern; Rafter and Brown (2011, 4) suggest that academic criminology 'can no longer aspire to monopolise criminological discourse'. This paper focuses on one specific public history, or as it is termed 'popular history'- the period crime movie. The aim is to review the movie *The Limehouse Golem* within the wider context of theoretical scholarship by emphasising the importance of the value of the knowledge produced by this type of history.

Using movies to understand and discuss themes and issues in law and criminology is not new. A recent text by Aristodemou, Macmillan and Tuitt (2017), addresses crime fiction and the law by drawing upon critical legal theory; another text by Rafter and Brown (2011) analyses criminological perspectives tested against crime movies' storylines. However, whilst the relatively new scholarship of 'law and literature' has been engaging with period crime novels, legal and criminology academics have paid little, if at all, attention to period crime fiction movies. Given that movies inform society about the law, albeit sometimes misleadingly, it does so also about the historical past; hence the need to engage critically with this popular history.

The debate on the credits of public history has at its core questions concerning truths, generation of knowledge, and its validity. Tosh (2015, 279) explains that because public history may be taken as contributing to 'a historical culture in a broad sense', its inevitable imprecision is seen as problematic. This concern is particularly significant given that for many people, a period film would be the only source of learning about how for example crime in Victorian London would have looked and felt like (O'Neil, 2004; Pingree, 1999; Bell, 2007). Indeed, public historians suggest that movies should be taken as a form of representation with its own, as put by Pingree (1999, 101), 'distinct protocols'.

Of course, the case of popular history and its value as a generator of knowledge and truth is far less obvious taken the cinematic creativity it involves. However, postmodern public historians do not limit the interpretation of history to the mere 'instructing' about the past. According to Bernstein (1989), the cinematic representation can reflect current public concerns; or more specifically, it could reflect 'truth as human meaning' rather than merely 'literal historical truth'. In this way, recent popular history has reconceptualised truth and knowledge. A good example is given by bell hooks (2012, 3) in her analysis of popular public discourses created by movies. She questions whether movies 'marketed and critically acclaimed as progressive texts of race, sex and class', are in fact reflecting, albeit covertly, 'conventional structures of domination'. A postmodern interpretation of a crime fiction draws attention to the violence of the law and to the corruption of the system (Aristodemou, 2017). However, Rafter (2000) explains how on the one hand movies may create the cultural space for expressing resistance to authority, whilst on the other hand, they also reinforce authority.

According to Aristodemou (2017), cultural products are not just entertainment; they are norm-creating, not least because they produce ideas, views and values as influential, if not more, than the norms found in text-law. Indeed, law and culture and public history meet at the convergence point where the postmodernism way of seeing things opens up the opportunity for a discussion of what otherwise is hidden from normal conversation. Carnes (1995, 10) suggests that films 'often teach important truths about the human condition'. Therefore, movies should not be read as merely constructing the past (Pingree, 1999). Rather, the analysis of period crime movies should draw upon the ways modern society imagines and frames its own understanding of crime, representation of the criminal and the victim as well as the criminal justice and the law (Rafter and Brown, 2011).

Therefore, as advised in the opening line in *The Limehouse Golem* movie,

Let us begin, my friends, at the end… (01:15)

Released in the UK in September 2017, based on the novel by Peter Ackroyd and directed by Juan Carlos Medina, the story may have many 'ends'. It is at this point that a close reading will determine the nature of its interpretation. The story could be read as the triumph of justice over evil; it could be read as a critique of the police and criminal justice in general. It could also be read within the context of the hardships and awkward life experienced by the performers of the music halls; or, as put by one reviewer, the story could be read as 'a glorious feminist twist on Jack the Ripper' (Smith, 2017).

However, it is a clue in the third opening scene which underlines the interpretation taken by this review. The scene is the opening of a performance at the Music Hall; a performance created after and as homage to the hanging of Little Lizi, hence making it the last scene chronologically. However, this is shown three minutes into the film, where the (real historical character) female impersonator Dan Leno presents to the audience a new show, one portraying the life and death of his friend- and this is what the movie is about:

> *The woman accused of poisoning her husband, but not just any woman, Little Lizi Darling of the music halls…but the city was enthralled by the fearsome Limehouse Golem. Who was he? Who would be his next victim? The Golem has last struck the day before her arrest. And his was the name on every Londoner lip...* (03:22)

This was exactly what Elizabeth Cree, or Little Lizi aspired to- for her name to be printed in the history books. The type of performance was less relevant, acting or killing, it did not matter- she just had to be remembered. However, this fictional story of a woman reflects *The* story of women, where their experiences and lives, rather than being acknowledged, have

been allowed to disappear through the mist of London (Naffine, 2007; Tosh, 2005; Spongberge, 2002).

Indeed, her artistic life comes to an end with her marriage; her serial killing is attributed instead to a man; she is executed in a bare courtyard of a prison, with no spectators, as would dictate the penal policy of the second half of the nineteenth-century.[5] It may well be that the production meant to challenge our views on who we think or we are made to believe Jack the Ripper was; but beyond this attempt at tricking our perception, it remains that Jack the Ripper is imprinted in our imagination as the 'cream' of British criminals. As a comparison, we know Myra Hindley as a pathetic, sick, child killer, certainly not deserving of being memorised in exhibitions, museums, guide tours, dramas and movie.[6] It is men which attract our criminal imagination; this is a well-known criminological perspective of the perception and construction of crime (Naffine, 2007). Even for the inspectors on the Limehouse Golem case, this is clear: *The Golem is a madmen, what else is to be understood?* (09:27).

This is not to suggest that we need more female criminals for the sake of the recognition of subjective experience. Rather, it is about how those experiences exposed to the public have been framed. For Inspector Kildare, *even madness has its own logic, here is none* (09:31). At this point he did not know that Lizi was the Limehouse Golem; and yet, the comment is very much reflective of the general views on women criminals, especially during the Victorian period- something must have been really wrong with them (Bulamur, 2016; Smart, 1992; Smart, 1976). In the case of Elizabeth Cree, she was sexually exploited by men as a child,

[5] Capital Punishment Amendment Act 1868 (31 & 32 Vict. c.24).

[6] See a digital history on Jack the Ripper and the Moors Murderers (Ian Brady and Myra Hindley): Criminal Mind WIKI: Criminal Minds Encyclopaedia http://criminalminds.wikia.com/wiki/Real_Criminals/Serial_Killers (accessed 13 Feb 2018).

was abused by her mother, lived in poverty by the docks; we later learn that she killed her mother, her husband and two colleagues from the Music Hall.

Little Lizi came to fame with male impersonation, a popular (initially working class) form of entertainment in the music halls (Aston, 1988).[7] The neutralisation of gender[8] through this performance meant that women could use satire to subvert male hierarchy and reproach unmarried-young women's immoral behaviour (Aston, 1988). Lizi wears a sailor costume in her act, but her *hope to keep men away* (42:06) by still wearing the costume after the show ended is ambiguous. In fact, when Vesta Tilley started using soldiers and sailors costumes from the beginning of the twentieth-century (because the impersonation of the Dandy fell out of fashion), she also changed her singing act. No longer had the acts showcased the notion of resisting male power-values; but rather, they reinforced male heroism and emphasised the importance of the duty of women in waiting for their men (Aston, 1988).

Moreover, the Limehouse Golem's police inspectors find out that the killer was inspired by the essay 'On Murder Considered as one of the Fine Arts', a real publication by Thomas De Quincey made to the Blackwood's Magazine in 1827. The movie suggests that this was some type of a sick guide on how to kill; in reality the original essay was a satire on the Ratcliff Highway killing, another high profile and popularly documented serial-killing in London in

[7] See also National Portrait Gallery, *National Memory Local Stories, Messages and Meanings: Words of War Vesta Tilley (1864-1952)*, https://www.npg.org.uk/whatson/national-memory-local-stories/resources/learning-resource-themes/messages-and-meanings-words-of-war/messages-and-meanings-words-of-warvesta-tilley-1864-1952/ (accessed 14 Feb 2018); Victorian and Albert Museum, *Music Hall Character Acts*, http://www.vam.ac.uk/content/articles/m/music-hall-character-acts/ (accessed 14 Feb 2018).

[8] Although performers where suppressing their femininity by enhancing male image through dress and body language, in fact they created a rather androgynous character (Aston, 1988, 248, 252).

1811.[9] Significantly, De Quincey addressed his essay to a gentleman's club (Morrison, 2009); therefore the use of this text by Lizi and her dressing as a Gentleman when carrying out the killing merely reinforces, in the movie, the perceived recognition of the symbolic and physical power of men. The fact that it is a woman after all who carries out the killing (thus giving a sense of 'he who laughs last, laughs loudest') might provide the twist for the storyline; however, within the bigger context- no one will ever know that, but the one police inspector who burnt the conclusive evidence.

The title of the film is also far more revealing that it may appear. The Limehouse Golem is represented in the movie as a symbolic evil creature; the name is given, according to Inspector Kildar, by the newspapers and it is welcomed by the killer. How better Lizi could be remembered if not with this grand name? However, the nature of the Golem is elusive. The Golem is a Jewish mystical creature. The legend expresses the creation of an artificial male hero, a saver of the Jewish community (Michaelson, 2018; Kerstein, 2018). Significantly however, Kerstein (2018) explains that the Golem does not represent the idealised saviour; in Jewish tradition 'golem' is an insult suggesting stupidity, lack of own reason and self-control - properties needed to successfully engage in violent acts of retribution. The 'golem', that is, 'gelem' or raw material, comes to life because it is needed; then it is destroyed by its creators because it becomes unruly. In a sense the Golem represent 'life', but also the need to control it, and thus its oppression. Like Lizi, the Golem's debut is short; its memory is overshadowed by those forces that have control over its life.

[9] See The murdermap.co.uk – this is a digital history addressing the Ratcliff Highway murders http://www.murdermap.co.uk/pages/blog_01/blog_item.asp?Blog_01ID=256 (accessed 14 Feb 2018).

And this is how the story ends, with a sower note that the 'reacquisition of the capacity for historical power and agency'(Kerstein, 2018) is not attained after all. A valid lesson for our contemporary representation of crime, women, justice, authority and patriarchal hierarchy.

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